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ABSTRACT

Though previous decades have witnessed numerous efforts to specify national educational objectives and plans, the effect of past actions of individuals and groups has been minimal. Recent attempts to coordinate the efforts of government and private agencies have also failed to create nation-wide policy formation. In these times of increased complexity, it is more important that national education policy be coordinated with all the major objectives of the society. A national citizens committee should be established to: (1) assess existing programs; (2) evaluate program priorities; (3) reassess the distribution of responsibility among federal, state, and local agencies; and (4) promote among educational institutions. The committee should be pluralistic, should maintain constant contact with constituencies, and should arrive at a consensus definition of nation-wide educational policy. (EMH)

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A Call for Unity, or E Pluribus Unum?

by

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Opening remarks made at "Forum '76: A Call for Unity," the Third National Conference on Open Learning and Nontraditional Education.

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In this America -- intellectually and technologically one of the most advanced nations in the world -- there is now a pressing need to confess that there are contradictions and confusion in the house of learning.

I wish to emphasize three things. For decades we have striven for national unity of purpose and unity of planning in education and rarely acted on advice given. As a result we have witnessed the growth of conflicting powers and action. Hence we must work in new ways towards greater unity of purpose and coherence of action.

In my concluding remarks at last year's Second National Conference on Open Learning I reiterated a definition by others of open learning: "a philosophy of learning, a craft of teaching, a vision of life." Indeed I was dour when I then said of that conference: "I find we have been neglectful of the final and important catalytic element: a vision of life." I felt we had been neglectful of the ends or goals of education. Yet how do we get at or act upon such ends or goals?

For a moment I want to dwell on that theme and review the record. As long ago as December 3, 1929, in his Annual Message to Congress, President Hoover said: "In view of the considerable differences of opinion as to policies which should be pursued by the Federal Government with respect to education, I have appointed a committee representative of the important educational

associations and others to investigate and present recommendations." The committee went to work, three volumes of findings were issued, recommendations were limited to federal action -- and no action was taken.

In the same year -- 1929 -- when he was at Harvard, Alfred North Whitehead issued his slender volume, The Aims of Education and Other Essays. While I did not read it until the 1940s, it has been an important influence on my professional life and thought. I am aware it influenced others as well. But essentially it was closet drama -- no collective or public action ensued.

After World War II there followed various Presidential committees and White House conferences on education under Presidents Truman, Eisenhower and Johnson. There was considerable data gathering, prognosis of needs, and declarations of objectives.

Of the work undertaken in behalf of policy and priorities set under Messrs. Truman and Eisenhower one can say of all in the words of James B. Conant: "... one must use a microscope to find any evidence today of the effects of their recommendations." (James Bryant Conant, Shaping Educational Policy. McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1964. P. 127.)

Mr. Conant began examining our problems of policy, which means setting goals and priorities, and in 1964 published his findings in Shaping Educational Policy. He conscientiously reviewed the problems of the vox populi regarding education as guarded by Federal and state law. This was not a forgotten volume, at least in certain respects. Conant concluded: "Let the fifty states, or at least fifteen to twenty of the more populous states, enter into a compact for the creation of an 'Interstate Commission for Planning a Nationwide Educational Policy.'" (Op. Cit. McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1964, p. 123.)

By Executive Order, also in 1964, Mr. Johnson established the Federal Interagency Committee on Education to coordinate the many departments and agencies of the Federal government which sponsor or are concerned with education. As a medium of inter-departmental and inter-agency communication this has doubtless been worthwhile. But essentially it is limited to Federal action past, present and future. It is, of course, wholly limited to the Executive Branch of government.

Through the considerable acumen and skill of former Governor Terry Sanford of North Carolina, there came into being the Education Commission of the States,

based largely on Conant's concept of a nation-wide policy group, as a resource for state-federal planning and resource allocation. Prior to this institution three regional associations had come into being: the New England Board of Higher Education, the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, and the Southern Regional Education Board. Each assayed policy and practice of higher education in its region. The Education Commission of the States, however, was to have broader concern for all of education nation wide. Policies and practices.

In my comments about the Education Commission of the States I wish to be fair, but I simply state that this quasi-governmental body has not been able to live up to Mr. Conant's expectations as to nation-wide policy formation. It has been limited to Federal and state financing of education. It has paid more attention to lower than to higher education. It has been beholden more to state interests than to the vox populi and social needs of the nation.

Let me jump back a bit. In 1962 Fritz Machlup suggested in The Production and Distribution of Knowledge in the United States: "For the sake of our national security, or even survival, and for the sake

of our national welfare and its material and moral prerequisites, we need an educational system that will significantly raise the intellectual capacity of our people." He went on to say, "... there is virtually no unemployment among the well-trained; but there is severe unemployment among those with no skills or physical skills only." (Op. Cit. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1962. P. 135.) As an economist, Machlup provides persuasive data that such is indeed the case. In the long haul -- looking beyond our recent economic experience -- I believe Machlup to be correct.

But many of us do not believe we have an educational system which will raise the intellectual capacity of our people and provide security and survival. No one is a soothsayer, yet I find elements of truth and caution about the future on many sides. Let me cite two. They may be extremists, but to say that is almost to justify poetic license and insight.

By 1970 a former editor of Fortune, Alvin Toffler, bent his journalistic expertise to write Future Shock. Surely cavalierly -- but perhaps with unpleasant truth -- he wrote: "Government ministries, churches, the mass media -- all exhort young people to stay in school, insisting that now, as never before, one's future is almost

wholly dependent upon education. Yet for all this rhetoric about the future, our schools face backward toward a dying system, rather than forward to the emerging new society." (Op. Cit., Random House, New York, 1970. Pp. 398-399.)

Let me turn to another critic, Jay W. Forrester of MIT. At a national meeting of educators in early 1976 Forrester remarked: "The case is strong that educational institutions, their research programs, and the content of their teaching are all implicated in the creation of today's socio-economic stresses. A critic could justifably claim that higher education is not merely irrelevant; it is an unwitting co-conspirator in leading society down a dead-end street. ... In short, the educational system is not fulfilling one of its primary objectives: how to put it all together." (Jay W. Forrester, "Moving into the 21st Century -- Dilemmas and Strategies for American Higher Education." Paper presented at the 62nd Annual Meeting of the Association of American Colleges, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, February 9, 1976. Pp. 8-9)

Well, what I am pointing out is that nation-wide and individual efforts have urged us to focus on nation-wide policy for education; yet little has been accomplished over nearly half a century. That is almost one quarter - and the most sophisticated quarter - of our national history! I am reminded of the story of a

salesman showing a father a put-it-together-yourself toy for his child. Said the salesman: This is an educational toy for your son and will teach him about reality -- no matter how hard he tries, he won't be able to get it together!

I wish to propose the establishment of a broadly representative national citizens council on goals, priorities, and means in American education. Given the complex educational issues and problems in which all of us are caught up, such a council could provide the mechanism not now available for a searching reappraisal of national education needs and goals vital if we are to set meaningful educational policies for the next decade or more.

No brief statement can adequately summarize the perplexing educational problems and issues with which this nation must cope. These cut across all levels of education and in one way or another affect all segments of our population. The following are presented to illustrate the wide range of problems and issues confronting us today and to provide a focus for discussion.

In a period where annual spending for education and training exceeds 108 billion dollars (7.8 per cent of the GNP), a report issued by Commissioner of Education Terrel H. Bell indicates that millions of adults do not

possess functional competency defined as the ability to use skills and knowledge for meeting the requirements of adult living.

Evidence from the Federally supported national assessment of education programs also shows that significant numbers of youngsters lack basic literacy and computational skills necessary before future adults can perform effectively as consumers and producers and as free citizens.

New aspirations of minorities, the poor and women for post-secondary education and rising delivery costs, are placing additional strains on scarce tax and private dollars available for education. At the same time tax payers are increasingly reluctant to vote school bond issues and complain of extravagance by the schools and colleges.

On the political side analysis by Dr. Samuel Halperin, Director of the Institute for Educational Leadership, raises a number of issues.

Congressional education committees increasingly over-legislate and over-regulate; they cannot be effectively checked by anyone; "establishment" education groups either get what they want or are hostage to a relatively few activist members and their small but powerful staffs.

Countervailing forces are generally weak or ig-

nored; e.g., HEW-USOE, ECS, state agencies. Or else they are intent on maximizing their share rather than on shaping public policy. For example, many states now have offices at various levels in Washington "to get theirs."

Non-educational power elites (e.g., industry and the unions) pay scant attention to the education "game," viewing it as a minor league affair despite the large portion of state and local expenditures consumed by education.

Much significant Federal education policy is increasingly made outside the two major Congressional education committees and outside of HEW. These decision-making arenas are even further removed from public scrutiny and press media than the "regular" education processes.

In an era of retrenchment and low Federal priority for education, this type of policy process is unlikely to meet critical national needs or to serve vital if weaker political interests.

Thus, increasingly, Federal education policy is becoming the exclusive preserve of a relative handful of effective, activist members, powerful staff, and a few astute lobbies.

Major consequences of this near-monopoly of policymaking are that most of the policy conversation is not about goals and purposes but about getting Federal money through: 1) preserving and expanding existing program authorizations; 2) expanding funding for the same; 3) enacting glamorous new programs where a need is perceived and giving these new advocates a hunting license for appropriations.

Conversely, there needs to be much more concern for a number of important parts of the national education puzzle. First, we need to assess how existing programs are working, program evaluation results; legislative oversight, etc. and whether they might better be terminated. When programs are repealed or allowed to expire, it is usually a reflection of weak constituency rather than demonstrated lack of effectiveness. Second, we must carefully establish relative priorities among programs and determine whether new enactments might not turn out to be competitive with existing programs. Third, we must ascertain the administrative feasibility of the burdens imposed upon administering bureaucracies at all levels -- Federal, state and local. Fourth, we must promote agreement on appropriate and inappropriate roles of the various levels of government in relation to education. Everything is fair game for Federal intervention. Consequently, the responsibility

of lower levels of government is increasingly unclear and there is widespread confusion about who is accountable for educational problems.

Perhaps most important is the need for a formulation of national goals, priorities, and means for education. Everything today is considered ad hoc. What pass for "priorities" are mostly politically, not philosophically, derived. There is little sense of the relationship of one program to another, of one level or segment of education to another, or of education to the rest of society. There are also large areas of disagreement as to how many parts of education are to be financed.

As I prepared my remarks for the closing address of the conference on open learning and nontraditional education, "Designing Diversity '75", I became even more convinced of the need for some focus on national goals for education. I was concerned that conference emphasis on diversity might be a weakness; that unity of purpose for a learning society should be defined in broad rather than narrow terms. It is my feeling that the many diverse aspects of learning, both traditional and nontraditional, must be supportive of one another yet designed to serve specific national goals. I therefore suggested establishment of a National Council for a Learning Society representative of all affected parties such as industry, labor,

the professions, government, and the media as well as the education community to work toward achieving unity of purpose.

How realistic is it to suggest that a consensus on national educational goals can be reached? On the basis of a superficial review of the literature, including goal statements by public school systems and higher education institutions, it appears likely that an attempt at such a consensus is worth a try. For example, providing effective communication and computation skills is in virtually all goal statements. Other education goals frequently stated also include providing the individual with: self-awareness and self-respect, coping skills, interpersonal relations skills, career-awareness and development, problem attack and solution, parental skills, citizenship or the ability to respect the rights of others and to perform effectively in maintaining a free society, use of leisure time, etc.

It is possible that goals of employers or society may not be entirely compatible with goals for individuals or families. However, an understanding of such differences or conflicts by a group composed of all sectors of society might well result in recommendations toward resolving them.

For purposes of discussion, let us examine my

proposal to establish a national citizens council on educational goals, priorities, and means for education. The National Council for a Learning Society would be charged with examining the political and jurisdictional underpinnings of educational policy and producing a prospectus for new and better policies. Membership would consist of recognized leaders from many diverse segments of society, persons whose pronouncements would be hard to ignore and whose views might add an element of thoughtfulness to the existing official and unofficial processes. The Council would be a tangible expression of the fact that education is the people's business, not the exclusive preserve of some. The majority of the Council would be non-educators.

The Council could be funded from a variety of sources: Federal, foundation, industry, unions, etc., and have a small, independent staff whose primary purpose would be to serve as the research and analysis arm of the full Council, to develop position papers on existing and proposed programs and policies for its consideration, and otherwise serve the Council.

The Council would:

1. Constitute an independent body which can serve as a medium for dialogue among all segments of society -- education and government, industry and labor, the professions and the public, etc.

2. Bring together diverse groups in American society to try to reach a consensus on values, goals and purposes of education and training in this nation, especially as they relate to nationwide education needs, emerging trends and specific pending programs and policies.

3. Provide independent assessments and recommendations as to priorities and means to the Executive branch of government, to the Congress, to state and local governments, and to all affected parts of the general public.

We should carefully consider what an independent group with the above mission might try to accomplish. It is likely that such a body would speak out, possibly taking sides to stir public interest in particular aspects of the national education scene. Such a group might also focus on questions such as the Federal or state or local role in specific high priority educational concerns. The group might certainly create constituencies and provide leadership by issuing policy reports or papers, and by use of the media. Such a group could also, when it wished, urge Congress to act or desist, or the President to sign or veto. It could endorse or castigate proposals, giving them national visibility irrespective of their origin or political aegis. Creation of such a group then might well provide another national force in education

not beholden to any vested interest. Indeed, the Council itself would be composed of a variety of interests.

Assuming that establishment of a National Council on a Learning Society makes sense, what role should the Federal government agencies play? Executive Order 11761 establishing the Federal Interagency Committee on Education vests the Secretary of HEW and the Assistant Secretary for Education with broad authorities to identify the nation's education needs and goals and recommend to the President policies promoting the progress of education.

If consensus on my proposal or some modification can be reached, I urge that the Secretary for Health, Education and Welfare assume leadership in taking the next steps toward establishment of such a body. I hope that exploratory efforts involving broader representation from all segments of our society can begin in 1976. The quest for better unity for national educational goals, priorities, and means could then begin as part of our national reassessment during the Bicentennial celebration year.